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Consequences of witnessing abusive supervision in schools

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Developmental Paper

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Abstract

Abusive supervision refers to followers' perceptions of the extent to which leaders engage in sustained display of non-verbal and hostile verbal behaviours. While extant literature has examined the determinants of abusive supervision and its consequences on victims, recent research has extended the study of abusive supervision to consider third parties who witness abusive supervision. The third-party perception of abusive supervision is independent of the subordinate's perception of abusive supervision. Specifically, an act might be perceived as abusive by a third-party even if the subordinate does not perceive it as such. This study applies social exchange theory and the indirect reciprocity paradigm to an empirical study of the consequences of witnessing abusive supervision in schools in Malta. While prior literature has examined the consequences of witnessing abusive supervision in corporations, no study has examined these phenomena among schoolteachers. Without such an understanding, academics, policy makers and managers are unable to comprehensively understand the effects of abusive supervision on schoolteachers. (158 words)

2,035 words in all

Literature

The shift to examining the effects of observing abusive supervision on third-party emotions and behaviours is driven by the need to understand the effects of abusive supervision on organisational outcomes (Skarlicki and Kulik, 2005). Specifically, for every victim of abusive supervision, third-party witnesses abound hence, research examining the effects of abusive supervision on subordinates which does not consider the effects of such behaviour on third parties significantly understates the effects of abusive supervision. Indeed, extant literature found that observing abusive supervision elicits third-party anger, frustration and in some instances pleasure and leads to retaliatory behaviour towards the supervisor, prosocial behaviour towards the victim and in some cases retaliatory behaviour towards the victim (Robinson and Bennett, 1995). Despite this promising research, extant literature lacks a thorough understanding of how and when observing abusive supervision elicits certain behavioural responses. While prior literature acknowledges that observing the same abusive supervision might lead to different third-party emotions and behaviours, extant literature is silent as to why this might be the case (Skarlicki and Kulik, 2005). While prior literature has examined how observing abusive supervision elicits third-party behaviour directed at the victim or supervisor, extant literature is silent as to whether witnessing abusive supervision could elicit short-term reactions towards one's job and the organisation that appear positive, at least in the short-term (Liao et al., 2021). This is surprising given that anecdotal evidence (e.g., Steve Jobs at Apple and Travis Kalanick at Uber) and academic studies (e.g., Shaffer et al., 2009) suggest third parties tolerate abusive supervisors if they feel that these supervisors are effective, and they are not going to be subject to abuse. Further, most prior literature examining third-party behavioural reactions to witnessing abusive supervision has relied on literature examining abusive supervision from the subordinate's point of view without considering how characteristics of the third-party influence these reactions. Finally, there is a lack of research examining when specific third-party reactions occur. In this respect there is a need for the identification of constructs which moderate the relation between witnessed abusive supervision

and third-party reactions. Without such an understanding, academics, policy makers and managers are unable to understand the effects witnessing abusive supervision might have on employees. While prior literature has shown that witnessing abusive supervision often leads to negative outcomes for the observer in corporations, my research extends this literature by examining the negative or positive consequences of witnessing abusive supervision in schools.

The Social Exchange Theory (SET) views interactions between individuals as an exchange between distinct parties (Molm and Cook, 1995). In this respect, there are four tenets which underpin SET. First, the exchange between different parties in the relation must obey the psychological phenomenon of satiation, where one party has a need which is fulfilled; second, participants take part in long-term exchanges; third; the exchange between the different parties develops into a relation based on mutual dependence where there are rational reasons for entering into the exchange and fourth, the exchange is influenced by a desire for gains rather than loss (Molm and Cook, 1995; Molm, 1997).

Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) use SET to explain follower's responses to abusive supervision, where victims of abusive supervision react negatively to abusive supervision. Responses to abusive supervision such as leader- or organisation- directed deviant behaviour ultimately influence organisation performance (Jiwen Song et al., 2009). Additionally, researchers argue that while reciprocity typically has positive connotations where positive exchanges give rise to positive responses, reciprocity as espoused by SET can also be negative where negative exchanges give rise to negative responses (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Tepper et al. (2009) suggests that negative reciprocity promotes the egoism of the victim.

While the above literature has used SET to explain the response of the victim to abusive supervision, the current study extends the use of SET to the responses of the third-party observer. On one hand when the third party observes that s/he is not being abused by a leader while colleagues are subject to abusive supervision, at least for a short period of time the third party perceives preferential treatment vis-à-vis colleagues. In terms of SET leader preferential treatment directed to the third party (through the non-abuse of the third party) elicits positive responses of the third party towards the supervisor and the organisation, in so far as the supervisor is perceived as embodying the organisational values. On the other hand, when the third-party witnesses abusive supervision, at least for a short period of time, the third party perceives an increased risk of being subject to similar abuse in the future. In terms of SET, this increased risk of being subject to similar abuse elicits negative responses of the third party towards the supervisor and the organisation, in so far as the supervisor is perceived as embodying the organisational values.

This study as it is the theorized channel through which witnessing abusive supervision influences third-party reactions. Specifically, X (supervisor) targets Y (subordinate) with abusive supervision. Third-party Z witnesses this abusive supervision and responds to X actions. Figure 1 below, presents a diagrammatic overview of indirect reciprocity.

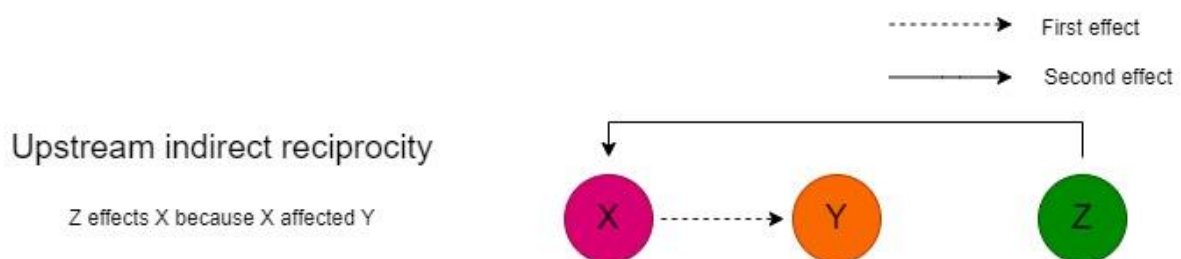


Figure 1: Upstream indirect reciprocity – X is the supervisor; Y is the subordinate and Z is the third-party observer. Source: Adapted from Nowak and Sigmund (2005)

In line with SET and the principle of indirect reciprocity, when a party does a (dis)favour to another party, even though the type of (dis)favour is often not clear, the expectation is that the (dis)favour is returned in the future (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Hence, when a third-party observes abusive supervision directed towards colleagues but not towards the third party, the perception instilled in the third party (at least in the short-term) is that the organisation favours the third party. Conversely, when a third-party observes abusive supervision directed towards colleagues, such behaviour even though not directed at the third-party, might be construed (at least in the short-term) as threatening since it increases the likelihood that third-party is subject to similar abusive supervision. As in terms of the theory of indirect reciprocity a reaction by the third party does not require a direct interaction between the parties, and in terms of SET a (dis)favour should be returned, the third-party perception that an ‘indirect’ (dis)favour has been received should give rise to a (negative) positive response by the third party. Specifically, at least in the short term, the third-party perceives (decreased) increased organisational support.

The current study posits that witnessing abusive supervision could in certain circumstances lead to changes in the third party (changes in psychological distress), in the relationship of the third party towards the victim of the abuse (changes in interpersonal deviance) and in the relationship of the third party towards the organisation (changes in organisational commitment). Such circumstances include third-party specific characteristics, such as moral identity - the third-party judgement of what is right or wrong; the third-party relationship with the victim of the abuse, such as rivalry – the perception that one can benefit from the situation at the expense of the victim and the third-party relationship with the supervisor, such as supervisors’ organisational embodiment – the degree to which one believes the actions of the supervisor are condoned by the organisation.

The social exchange theory posits that responses are a function of a social exchange between two parties. Hence, social exchange theory posits that if employees are supported within the organisation they will have greater organisational commitment to the organisation, which in return will improve their performance. Using a multi-wave approach, Tan et al. (2021) draws on social exchange theory to examine the relation between third-party perception of abusive supervision and third-party creativity. Findings of this study suggest that perceived organisational support mediates, and supervisory organisational embodiment moderates the negative relation between third-party perceived abusive supervision and third-party creativity. These results are in line with Jiang et al. (2019) who finds a negative relation between witnessing abusive supervision and third-party creativity, however Jiang et al. (2019) suggest that this relation is mediated by third-party creative self-efficacy.

The theory of indirect reciprocity, that draws on the social exchange theory, is another theory which is particularly pertinent to this study since it explains how the supervisor-subordinate relation elicits third-party responses towards the supervisor. The theory of indirect reciprocity is important since unlike social exchange theory it doesn’t require a direct exchange between the parties. Specifically, it provides for a response from a third-party, who is not a party to the exchange between the supervisor and the subordinate. Indirect reciprocity influences the third-party response towards the victim and perpetrator of abusive supervision (Peng et al., 2014). Peng et al. (2014) draws on the theory of indirect reciprocity to suggest that employees consider

the witnessed behaviour of the supervisor when assessing the value of their relationship with the supervisor. The study tests the theory of indirect reciprocity using an online survey among 25 non-profit and governmental organisations and finds that the negative relation of abusive supervision with performance and co-worker support is stronger when peer abusive supervision is lower.

While the prevalence and consequences of abusive supervision has been studied in several sectors, a sector which has received less attention is the education sector. The education sector refers to the key institutions in the formation of current and future leaders. In this respect, examining the consequences of abusive supervision on such an important sector is of paramount importance. Research on teachers has generally provided mixed evidence. Specifically, while some studies have found that teachers are highly stressed and disappointed with their working conditions (Attard Tonna and Calleja, 2018), other studies have found that teachers are generally satisfied with their job (OECD, 2020). By examining the short-term consequences on teachers witnessing abusive supervision, this study seeks to contribute to this debate.

In this respect, the three research questions that this study seeks to address are:

- 1) When and how does witnessing abusive supervision (WAS) lead to changes in observer psychological distress (PD), interpersonal deviance (ID), affective, continuance, and normative organisational commitment in schoolteachers?
- 2) Does perceived organisational support (POS) mediate the relation between WAS and PD, ID, affective, continuance and normative organisational commitment in schoolteachers?
- 3) Does moral identity of the observer, rivalry between the victim and observer, and supervisor organisational embodiment moderate the relation between WAS and POS in schoolteachers?

This study provides a better understanding of the outcomes and complexities of witnessing abusive supervision. The findings of this study will be particularly relevant to policymakers working in the educational setting, since attaining a comprehensive understanding of the consequences of abusive supervision will aid policymakers in addressing teacher discontent and dissatisfaction in schools and associated impacts including for employee retention. Specifically, while several studies have examined teacher satisfaction in schools, results of these studies are often inconclusive. On one hand, Attard Tonna and Calleja (2018) report 71% of teachers in Malta are disappointed with their working conditions, feel unsupported and undervalued at school. In a similar vein according to the 2021 Eurydice Malta ranks in the top five countries in Europe where teachers have the highest levels of stress (Eurydice, 2021). On the other hand, the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) finds that 85% of teachers and 100% of leaders in Maltese schools are all in all satisfied with their job (OECD, 2020).

The data collection is in process and the researcher will start the data analysis. During the conference the researcher will present preliminary results of the study to the audience.

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